



Measuring the Masses Part 3: U.S. Federal Census 1840-1790

Lyn Rasmussen, CG® Research Specialist
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Introduction

Have you researched your family back to the 1850 Census and hit a brick wall? Try moving into the early census records, 1840 back to 1790, you know, the ones with the “tick marks.”

Are you wondering if the early census records could even help; after all, aren't they just useless?

They can be very helpful. With a few tips and tools, you may be able to find your ancestor and use the census clues to help find additional records for the same individual.

Objectives

- History and Background-why a census?
- Genealogical Value-Discover how early census records provide clues to other records about an individual
- Using the Records-tools for analyzing early census records.
- Finding the Records-indexes and images

History and Background

- The Constitution of the United States requires a census be taken every 10 years but did not specify how to do it.
- Congress passes the Acts to establish and regulate how to take the census. This has changed through the years.

Genealogical Value

Early census records contain information you might not be aware of. Many have a second page that is often missed. Clues about your ancestor can be found in the following information found on various early census.

- Place, time, and birth year range for your ancestor. Verify where your ancestor was living and search for additional record types in that area. Birth year range can be helpful even if not exact.
- Associates and neighbors. Those they lived near may be relatives, in-laws, and those in the community with whom they migrated. Always look for persons of interest among the associates and neighbors.
- Military service. Pensioners of the Revolutionary War, and other early wars, were recorded by name and age, including women.
- Immigration and naturalization. Many early censuses recorded the number of foreigners not naturalized in the household. This leads to immigration and naturalization records and may help you recognize your ancestor and/or lead to other records about naturalization and immigration to search in the area where your ancestor lived.

- Occupation and economics. Many of the censuses recorded how many members of a household were involved in trades such as mining, agriculture, commerce, manufacture, navigation, and engineering. This can help identify your ancestor and place them in historical context.
- Health conditions. These notations may help you recognize your ancestor as well as understand more about their life.

Using the Records

For analyzing tools such as charts, worksheets, and forms use the following websites. Or create your own.

- National Archives: <https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/charts-forms>
- FamilySearch.org: https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Census_Forms
- Ancestry.com: <https://www.ancestry.com/cs/census-forms>
- Cyndi's List: <https://www.cyndislist.com/us/census/forms/>
- Google search for *us census forms* or *us census worksheets*
- Research log templates: https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Research_Logs

General Strategies to remember

- **Strategy #1**
Go from the known to the unknown
Start with a firm foundation in the post 1850 records. Don't try to push back in the early census records too quickly in your research. Thoroughly research your known ancestors, their associates, neighbors, and family members in the post-1850 records of all types.
- **Strategy #2**
Find a person in every record
Find each person related to your ancestor in every possible record. For example, when looking for death records search for a death certificate or register, obituary, cemetery record and funeral program. Each record can contain different and helpful information and can help with your pre-1850 research.
- **Strategy #3**
Find all known family members
Search for everyone in the family – that includes siblings, aunts, and uncles and sometimes even nieces and nephews. The more you know about the structure of the family, the more success you will have in locating your family in early census records.
- **Strategy #4**
Be aware of name changes
Surnames can have multiple spellings for the same name. Be liberal in your thinking about how a surname was spelled. Names may change over generations. Make a list of all possible variants and search using the variations.
- ***Strategy #5**
Keep a research log. This is a must for success in the early records.